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ABSTRACT

The central paradox of Karl Marx's work is his belief that the vision of mankind leaving inequality and scarcity behind is attainable. The idea that human alienation, inequality, and need could be rendered obsolete by a future communist society of abundance is a significant failing in Marx's thought. It is at the same time the critical element in the moral impulse which animates many Marxists and revolutionary egalitarians. This vision gives Marxism its idealistic strengths; a goal worth attaining, worth the struggle, worth the sacrifice, and worth the blood. Marx examined the nature of capitalism with painstaking care, then took what philosopher Peter Clecak called a "quantum leap out of history." He left history when he defined his goal to be a communist utopia. In reality, this goal is beyond the reach of science and human activity due to economic scarcity. The fundamental reason that no nation has attained communism is because a true communist system requires an abundance of resources, but the resources of every society and the earth as a whole remain limited. (BZ)

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Karl Marx as a Social Scientist and Utopian Dreamer

The writings of Karl Marx (1818-1883) touch on many disciplines: philosophy, history, economics, sociology, political science and social psychology. But his lasting significance stems from four interconnected aspects of his thought. These are the themes addressed in this paper: 1) the moral impulse underlying his ideas, 2) the validity of his "sociology of change," i.e., the usefulness of his scientific insight, 3) the need for people to be self-emancipated, and 4) his utopian vision of the future.

MORAL IMPULSE

It is an error to deny that Marxism contains a profoundly moral core which attracts the lowly and their sympathizers. No one should underestimate the appeal which Marx's rage against the capitalist system has for the oppressed of the world. And, his indignation at the evils of capitalism attracts more than just oppressed. It attracts the idealistic, the empathic, the hopeful, and the young. When the "Young Marx" of 1840s and '50s was rediscovered in the 1960s, hundreds of American college students were astounded to learn of Marx's abiding humanism, his despair over human alienation, and his empathy for impoverished humanity. Some of these students and others embarked on a study of Marx's economic, political, and sociological theories. But, no matter how devoted they became to a discovery of the "scientific Marx," we must remember that they were urged on by an impulse for social justice.

It is this emotive force which connects the social teachings of Jesus Christ and Karl Marx. Those Christians who currently adhere to the doctrine of "liberation theology" are only one reflection of that powerful emotional urge to help one's neighbor (one's brother). In short, we miss some vital facts about Marxism's appeal if we fail to acknowledge the moral impulse which undergirds it. It also is erroneous to state, as have some, that Marxism has no moral end save the triumph of the revolution and its leaders. True, communists have used nearly every means to obtain their ends, but so have capitalists, Moslems, and even Christians. The point is—the Marxist revolution has a moral content. Marx aimed at creating a moral state of life in which all men and women were free to pursue their greatest potentialities in a brotherhood of economic, political, and social equality. This dream, this compelling image of justice and harmony, has moved people to make tremendous sacrifices. And, while Marx's writings do not guarantee that human sacrifice will bring success, he did argue that the struggle is necessary and that it is impelled by a moral imperative. That is one meaning behind Marx's remarks that: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."¹

So, called upon to act, potential social revolutionaries search through Marx's writings to discover how to evaluate the conditions of the real world and how to succeed within those conditions. This is what Marx intended because he clearly knew that, within the objective limitations of their era, men make history.² He also knew that there was nothing inevitable about the rise of communism. Communist society, according to Marx, would not be created by unconscious and unseen historical forces. That is why he was so deeply involved in the trade-union activities of the First International (1864-1872) and so eager to raise the class consciousness of the proletariat.

Only the self-aware and self-conscious actions of the proletariat could prevent capitalism from developing into a barbaric dark age.³

SOCIOLOGY OF CHANGE

So, in the hope of providing workers with more than just moral indignation, Marx devoted himself to a rational understanding of the wage labor system. He studied capitalism with searching, scientific care. The totality of his work amounted to a magnum opus on social change. It was a "sociology of change" based on reason, logic, and empiricism. He described the origin of capital, the nature of commodity production, the causes of economic crises, imperialism, the falling rate of profit, and the making of the industrial working class. His views and use of the dialectic, surplus value, and class struggle have so permeated the modern political and academic world that, much like Judeo-Christian beliefs, they are an inescapable part of our intellectual milieu.

Many non-Marxist political scientists, economists, historians, and sociologists have accepted the concepts which Marx developed as a guide to their own examination of social phenomenon. And Marxists scholars, of course, have used his insights and methodology to put forth new interpretations of contemporary social reality. For example, such outstanding American and British intellectuals as: C. Wright Mills, G. William Domhoff, Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, Herbert Marcuse, William Appleman Williams, Eugene Genovese, James Weinstein, Eric Hobsbawn, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson have embraced Karl Marx's theoretical work as rigorous, valid, and reasonably predictive.⁴ These thinkers, and others like them, are undogmatic Marxists. They have treated Marx like any other 19th century figure—in a scholarly way. But they also have adopted classical Marxism as a methodology, and his ways of thinking are central to their own attempts to explain the contemporary world.

So, Marx's writings have a scientific core which is still applicable in the late 20th century. His explanation of the interaction of technology, institutions, historical trends, and human social relationships is both rigorous and useful. According to Penny Lernoux's book Cry of the People, when South American priests studied Marxist sociology at the University of Louvain in Belgium, they returned to Latin America imbued with the tools of Marxian analysis and approach that enabled them to uncover such imperialistic practices as "transfer pricing" or the selected buying and selling of materials from a parent or subsidiary international company to avoid or minimize local taxes.⁵ They also discovered a wage system that brought U.S. firms a 3 to 1 return on every dollar they invested in Latin America between 1950 and 1965,⁶ and the fact that, by 1970, 99% of all U.S. AID loans to Latin America were being spent in the U.S. for products costing 30 to 40% more than going world prices.⁷ Such exposés fed and continue to feed the spirit of rebellion festering in Latin America. In short, the mingling of Marx's "sociology of change" and the Christian theology of liberation has produced an explosive potential in Latin America. Once Marx's "sociology of change" and the Christian message of justice⁸ found in the social gospel were blended in a culture permeated with centuries of Catholicism, it was bound to produce protests, strikes, boycotts, and violence.

SELF-EMANCIPATION

Marx, of course, would have relished the grass roots aspects of the struggle occurring in Latin America (e.g. comunidades de base). His work in the First International was a reflection of his urge to participate in the day-to-day battles of ordinary workers. Without excluding rural peasants,⁹ he believed that the working class and the working class alone was the only class that

could usher in the socialist society. His support of the revolutionary workers and artisans in the Paris Commune of 1871 was based, in part, on their extraordinary willingness to defy accepted patterns of deference and class dependency. Likewise, he advocated judiciously considered strikes as demonstrations of working class courage and as necessary for resisting the encroachments of capital.¹⁰ Indeed, although he contended that strikes for higher wages could not reverse the general tendency of capitalist production to lower the average standard of wages, he did urge strikes because they prepared workers for the ultimate task of making a socialist revolution.¹¹ In short, Marx argued that socialism had to be attained through the self-emancipation of working people. His prime example of this self-assertion was the Paris Commune. As a grass roots democracy of workers and artisans, it became his model for the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Marx did not want one party or one person eliminating worker control and ruling over the workers.¹² In his view, the essence of socialism was more, not less, economic, political and social democracy.

The task was to make workers aware of their capabilities and of the revolutionary strategy they had to follow. As we have seen, Marx believed that this was possible through reason, study, logic, and organized action. He hoped to channel the strongest of passions and emotions in an organized effort that would succeed with a minimum of working class losses and without jeopardizing the democratic goals of the movement.¹³ This, perhaps, was asking for too much because a successful revolution requires organization, and organization requires a hierarchy of command. Yet, Marx maintained that workers were obliged to make their own revolution.

There is no justification of one party or one man rule in Marx's writings. That was an invention dictated by the conditions facing Lenin in Russia. Marx clearly hoped that his publications would provide workers with the sort of knowledge they could use to eliminate any permanent hierarchy of revolutionary leaders. As a Marxist revolutionary herself, Rosa Luxemburg interpreted Marx's view to mean that Marxist leaders were to guide the working class struggle, but they had to interact with the revolutionary people so closely that the distinction of leaders and followers could become obliterated in a mutual learning process. Many know how futile the real world has made that view of leaders and followers.

UTOPIAN VISION

But there is another and more significant failing that has crippled the efforts of Karl Marx. That failing consists of his vision that human alienation, inequality, and need could be rendered obsolete by a future communist society of abundance. As he stated in his Critique of the Gotha Program, his vision was a society dominated by the precept: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."¹⁴ In one version or another, this utopian vision probably extends as far back as the first class societies in existence, but in Marx's day it was passed on to him by 19th century French utopian socialists. The fact that he inherited such a hoary idea only made his advocacy of it all the more powerful. Indeed, the image of mankind leaving inequality and scarcity behind is a critical element in the moral impulse which animates many Marxists and revolutionary egalitarians. As such, the vision gives Marxism its idealistic strength. The vision really is a goal worth attaining, worth the struggle, worth the

sacrifice, and worth the blood. But is it attainable or is it an illusion? Marx thought it was attainable, and therein lies the central paradox of Marx's work.

Marx examined the nature and function of capitalism with painstaking care and insight. He imparted a knowledge and understanding of the wage labor system that is unsurpassed in its scope, thoroughness, and methodology. But, after employing scientific methods to research, describe, and analyze the historical, sociological, and economic nature of industrial capitalism, Marx took what philosopher Peter Cilecak called a "quantum leap out of history."¹⁵ He left history behind when he defined his goal as a communist utopia. In the real world, this goal is beyond the reach of science and human activity. So, paradoxically, Marx's "sociology of change" brings some people as close to understanding the real world and how to change it as is humanly possible, but his ultimate goal is outside the realm of possibility.

We all realize that no group or nation has ever created a Marxist, i.e., communist, society. But is this because Karl Marx's ideas are obsolete or because every Marxist revolution has faced unique historical circumstances which have warped it or because capitalism has shown remarkable resiliency or because communist leaders have always betrayed their revolutions? No. The fundamental reason that no nation has attained communism is because a true communist system requires an abundance of resources, but the resources of every society and the earth as a whole remain limited. Because the world of economic resources remains a world of scarcity, the allocation of resources must always remain unequal or fall short of the amount that could fulfill the communist precept of "to each according to his needs."

By failing to confront the persistence of economic scarcity, Marx's work proceeded from a historical, rational, and scientific framework to a utopian framework.

In every self-proclaimed communist or Marxist regime of today's world, this has meant that none have done any better than refurbish exploitation and have continued to follow the same precept as capitalism—"to each according to his work." They may have eliminated vast disparities of wealth or massive poverty, but they have not nor will they ever attain communism. They have not ended alienation, transformed work into a voluntary creative act, eliminated authoritarian social structures, destroyed the state, established worker control, distributed goods to each as he has need or ended oppression. Thus, the Marxist/communist protest ideal remains a critical concept for exposing and evaluating the inadequacies of the capitalist system, but it also remains a utopian illusion. Clearly, this has created a two edged sword which has become a dangerous instrument in the hands of fanatics.

THE FUTURE

So what is the future of Marxism in a world burdened with sickness, poverty, and oppression? What is to be done by individuals armed with Marx's "sociology of change" and driven by a moral impulse toward a utopian future? Well, obviously, some of them will pursue the murderous excesses of the past,¹⁶ but others, the non-utopians, may use his "sociology of change" to build democratic political movements and democratic societies. Which of these two groups will prevail in the future may be determined entirely by local circumstances or by counterrevolutionary opposition. But liberals and social democrats, at any rate, may use Marx's "sociology of change" to promote social justice without succumbing to the utopian illusion. And, when one considers the tragic misery confronting two thirds of mankind, the modest goal of a decent, humane life may be utopia enough.

NOTES

¹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Lewis S. Feuer, ed, Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, Doubleday, New York, 1959, p. 245.

²The classic examples of Marx's comments on men making history may be found in his Theses on Feuerbach and The German Ideology, but the complexity of his view of men and history is best captured in these remarks from the German Ideology: "... at each stage [of history] there is found a material result: a sum of productive forces, a historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor, a mass of productive forces, different forms of capital, and conditions, which, indeed, is modified by the new generation on one hand, but also on the other prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances." Ibid., p.258. See also the quote in Theses on Feuerbach: "The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstances, and that the educator himself needs educating." Ibid., p. 244. See finally the remarks in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, International publishers, New York, 1968, p. 15.

³Both Marxist and non-Marxists have argued that Karl Marx maintained that communism or socialism was an inevitable outcome of the contradictions of mature capitalism. But this view crudely distorts Marx's position. It ignores the crucial role which voluntarism plays in his overall deterministic philosophy. Marx not only believed that the attainment of socialism/communism required a mature economic system, but a mature proletariat as well. Discussing the subjective element in making a social revolution, Marx used the Poverty of Philosophy to point out that the proletariat had to move from a class in itself to a class for itself before it could carry out the political struggle required by its interests. Unless the proletariat developed class self-consciousness, capitalism would continue its development and completely demean labor. See Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, Charles H. Kerr & Comp., Chicago, 1913, pp. 188-191.

Writing to illustrate this point of view, Herbert Marcuse noted that Marx projected a possible rather than a necessary future for socialism/communism. Marcuse used several keen passages to state: "Nevertheless, it would be a distortion of the entire significance of Marxian theory to argue from the inexorable necessity that governs the development of capitalism to a similar necessity in the matter of transformation to socialism." "... "The revolution depends indeed upon a totality of objective conditions: it requires a certain attained level of material and intellectual culture, a self-conscious and organized working class on an international scale, acute class struggle.

These become revolutionary conditions, however, only if seized upon and directed by a conscious activity that has in mind the socialist goal. Not the slightest natural necessity or automatic inevitability guarantees the transition from capitalism to socialism."

"The possibility of rational planning under capitalism does not, of course, impair the validity of the fundamental laws that Marx discovered in this system — the system is destined to perish by virtue of these laws. But the process might involve a long period of barbarism. The latter can be prevented only by free action. The revolution requires the maturity of many forces, but the greatest among them is the subjective force, namely, the revolutionary class itself." Herbert Marcuse, Reason and Revolution, Beacon Press, Boston, 1960, pp. 317-319. My emphasis.

⁴A further sample of some prominent contemporary economists and historians who have been profoundly influenced by Marx includes: Ernest Mandel, Pierre Jalée, Lester Thurow, Robert L. Heilbroner, Eric Foner, Philip Foner, Melvyn Dubofsky, David Montgomery, George Lichtheim, Herbert Aptheker.

⁵Penny Lernoux, Cry of the People, Doubleday, New York, 1980, p. 215.

⁶Ibid. p. 58.

⁷Ibid. p. 33.

⁸A leading theme among those who adhere to the theology of liberation outlook is expressed in John 15:12 "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you." C.I. Scofield, ed., The Holy Bible, Oxford U. Press, New York, 1945, p. 1137.

⁹Although Marx repeatedly stated that the communist revolution would spring out of the folds of class conflict in the most industrial nations on earth (i.e., England, the U.S. and possibly France or Germany), he did not rule out the possibility of a socialist revolution beginning in underdeveloped countries. In 1853, for example, he published a New York Daily Tribune article in which he stated: ". . . the Chinese revolution will throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political revolutions on the [European] Continent." And, in 1858, he cautioned one of his Russian critics (Mr. Zhukousky) against applying his ideas so rigidly that one could only envision social change in terms of a historical model inexorably proceeding from slavery to feudalism to capitalism to socialism. Russia, Marx suggested, might follow a different path. Karl Marx, ed. by Shlomo Avineri, Karl Marx On Colonialism and Modernization, Doubleday, New York, 1969, p. 73, pp. 467-470. See also M.M. Bober, Karl Marx's Interpretation of History, W.W. Norton, New York, 1965, pp. 42-43.

The evidence that Marx saw social revolutionary potential in rural peasantry is clear cut. At the time of the 1871 Paris Commune, he delivered this appraisal of that potential: "The Rurals [i.e., the counterrevolutionary rural elite]. . . knew that three months' free communication of Communal Paris with the provinces would bring about a general rising of the peasants, and hence their anxiety to establish a police blockade around Paris, so as to stop the spread of the rinderpest." Karl Marx and I. Lenin, The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune, International Publisher's, New York, 1968, p. 64.

¹⁰Karl Marx, ed. Eleanor Marx Aveling, Value, Price and Profit, International Publishers, New York, 1971, p. 61.

¹¹Ibid, p. 62.

¹²In the midst of his praise for the democracy exhibited by the Paris Commune, Marx not only wrote — "On the other hand, nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the Commune than to supersede universal suffrage by hierarchic investiture," — but he suggested that democratic revolutionists had to (and would) cast off revolutionary opportunists and elitists (Blanquists?) who hampered the "full [egalitarian] development" of the revolution. Marx, The Civil War in France . . ., pp. 59, 67.

¹³Marx believed that socialism would be ushered in by different means in different places. For instance, he imagined that it might be attained in the U.S., England and possibly Holland through non-violent electoral politics, but he saw little hope for non-violent change in Tsarist Russia. See R. Lawrence Moore, European Socialists and the American Promised Land, Oxford U. Press, New York, 1970, p. 42; Karl Marx, Speech to International Working Men's Association, Sept. 8, 1872, in On Revolution, Saul K. Padover, ed., McGraw-Hill, New York, 1971, p. 64.

¹⁴Marx, ed. Feuer, Basic Writings . . ., p. 119.

¹⁵Peter Clecak, Radical Paradoxes, Harper and Row, New York, 1973, p. 24.

¹⁶The false hopes of Marxist utopians may be encouraged, unfortunately, by some of Marx's most trenchant prose. They can use comments from masterful works such as A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy to justify their endless failure to achieve communism. In Critique Marx wrote: "No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society." Karl Marx, Maurice Dobb, ed., A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, International Publishers, New York, 1970, p. 21.